DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 743 RC 022 167

AUTHOR	Kims, Amanda
TITLE	Reinforcing Resistance to Drug and Alcohol Use through Teen Role Models. NERCRD Project Report.
INSTITUTION	Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, University Park, PA.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.cas.nercrd.psu.edu/Publications/lifeskills.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; After School Programs; *Alcohol Education; Coping; *Cross Age Teaching; *Drug Education; Elementary School Students; Intermediate Grades; *Interpersonal Competence; Prevention; Program Descriptions; *Role Models; Role Playing; *Rural Youth
IDENTIFIERS	Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

In the Life Skills Training program, teen leaders teach social skills to rural fifth- and sixth-grade children to help them resist drugs and alcohol in high school. Based on a Boys & Girls Clubs of America program, the 9-week after-school program provides youth with accurate information; teaches youth how to handle a range of problem situations through a systematic problem-solving strategy; conveys self-instructional techniques designed to help youth exercise self-control; teaches adaptive coping strategies for relieving stress, anxiety, and pressure; and teaches youth verbal and nonverbal assertive skills. The program was piloted in several Pennsylvania and New York locations. The teen leaders used games, visual aids, and role playing to teach children resistance skills in a fun way. Teens were trained for 5-8 hours and taught the entire curriculum. Adults supervised or helped out with problem situations. Children learned more readily from teens and developed positive relationships with their teen teachers. The teen teachers gained leadership experience, improved their public speaking skills and self-esteem, and redefined themselves in front of their own peers. Both teens and adults felt that the program was well implemented and that the younger children were very interested in what was being taught. Most adults agreed that the program changed attitudes and behaviors and positively reinforced resistance to drugs sand alcohol. (TD)

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Reinforcing Resistance to Drug and Alcohol Use Through Teen Role Models

by Amanda Kims, Student Intern

Where I grew up in Kane, Pennsylvania, the trees outnumber the people, and there's not a lot for rural youth to do. For entertainment, most of my peers resorted to drinking and driving around back roads or hiding out in the woods to do drugs. As a teenager, I lost a friend to drunk driving accidents nearly every year. Drug and alcohol programs didn't exist at the school I attended, and peer pressure was immense. It didn't take long before I realized that my little town was just as susceptible to problems associated with widespread drug abuse, problems once synonymous with urban areas.

It may surprise you to learn that when it comes to drug abuse, rural areas are at as much risk as urban ones. According to the Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, by 1992, the difference between the levels of marijuana use for urban and rural areas differed by only 0.1%. Likewise, a high school survey conducted by the University of Michigan found that by 1992, rural and urban differences in illicit substance use had disappeared. The most alarming statistic though, occurs with alcohol use; here rural areas exceed their urban counterparts by 2% in excessive alcohol use and 4% in binge drinking. For some substances, such as smokeless tobacco, inhalants, and stimulants, rural areas are ahead. This may make you wonder what conditions have contributed to this rise in alcohol and drug abuse in rural areas. How are rural areas different than they used to be?

Well for one thing, the composition of many family structures has changed. Many teens live in single-parent households, and some teens who don't are left unsupervised for long periods of time while both parents are working.

Also, many teens face difficult home situations. The stress of day to day living for many families is difficult. Without proper support systems, many teens do not develop a solid sense of self. They suffer from low self-esteem. They've never been taught healthy coping mechanisms and decision-making skills and lack the assertiveness to "just say no" to drugs. Increasingly, teens turn to drugs and alcohol to offset feelings of isolation, loneliness and boredom. This leads to risky behavior that may or may not involve drugs. Many youth in rural areas face an increase in poverty, resource stressed environments, addiction to drugs and alcohol, and psychiatric problems that may lead to severe depression, suicide, or violence (Compton, Hughes and Smith, 1990.) These problems are especially evident in rural Pennsylvania, where more than 20% of Pennsylvanians never go to high school, and almost 550,000, the majority from rural towns, are illiterate (Ciresi, 1990.)

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In response to these alarming statistics, Drs. Timothy Rollins and Edgar Yoder at Penn State have developed a Life Skills Training program to help rural youth cope with the myriad of challenges they face. Through 4-H clubs and schools, they work with teen leaders to teach children life skills that will help them make informed decisions, especially concerning drugs and alcohol usage. The Life Skills Training program is based on the Boys & Girls Clubs of America Start SMART program. Dr. Rollins said that he was encouraged by an article he read in Time magazine, November 11, 1996 issue. This article highlighted a Life Skills Training program developed by Gilbert Botvin, director of Cornell University's Institute for Prevention Research. Because of its success, Dr. Rollins decided to adapt a similar program using the SMART curriculum. He commented on why he chose the SMART Moves program over other programs like DARE. "You probably hear more about project DARE than you do about SMART Moves. There's been no formal evaluation of the DARE project whereas there has been lots and lots of research done about the SMART Moves program that shows it has a positive effect on improving resistance skills in younger kids. They need social skills to help them resist drugs and alcohol in high school."

Life Skills Training Program Sites

Fall 1995, the Life Skills Training (LST) program was implemented as a pilot program in the Philipsburg-Osceola School District in Centre County, Pennsylvania. Three 4-H clubs in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, also participated, as well as a suburban housing project site outside of Scranton in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania. January 1996, the Panama Central School in Panama, New York, joined the pilot program. Sites varied in the number of students involved, having anywhere between ten to thirty students per class. Selection of sites was based on the interest level of the counties. Counties that were chosen expressed a high interest in the program and were willing to find leaders to instruct the children. The program consisted of nine weekly sessions. Sessions ranged from one to one and one-half hours, depending on the enthusiasm of the children. Teens taught the LST curriculum to fifth graders, with the intent to follow-up the next year.

Life Skills Training Objectives

The Life Skills Training program is guided by several objectives

- To provide youth with accurate information which may be immediately personalized.
- To teach youth how to handle a diverse range of problem situations through a systematic problem solving strategy as well as techniques which could help them develop potential solutions.
- To convey self-instructional techniques designed to help youth exercise self-control over their behavior.
- To teach youth adaptive coping strategies for relieving stress, anxiety and pressure involving both covert cognitive coping skills and overt relaxation training techniques.
- To teach youth how to develop important verbal and non-verbal assertive skills.

What the principal investigators hoped to prove was that teen leaders could have a positive effect on youth resistance skills. This was proven qualitatively by responses from both the teens and adults.

Curriculum

The curriculum consisted of teens teaching youth standard information about drugs and alcohol such as health issues and dangers. Youth engaged in activities, mainly games, to reinforce the concepts taught. Some of the games included a version of *Jeopardy*. Other competitions required students to write their answers on the chalkboard. One of the teen leaders said that the latter really encouraged the children to learn because writing on the chalkboard became an incentive. *Prevention Baseball* was another game used in the program. It required youth to answer questions in order to move from base to base. In many schools, the game was played in the gym with an actual ball and bat. In Philipsburg, teen leaders changed the game to basketball and played the game in the school's gym.

In addition to games, leaders also used VCR instructional tapes and visual aids. One of the most unusual visual aids was used at the Panama, New York, site. Rick Walters, the program coordinator and an adult leader, said that he and his teen leaders used a live reptile in their program. They wrapped it in beautiful paper to make it look like a present. The kids were shocked when they opened up the present to find something ugly inside. Rick explained that this exercise demonstrated to the kids that everything isn't always as wonderful as it appears. "What you see is not always what you get," he said. "That's how it is with drugs and alcohol."

Role-Playing

Another big part of the LST curriculum involves role-playing. Youth engage in pretend situations that mimic real life. An example is having someone pressure a child to try drugs and letting the child practice saying "no." Most of the

situations involve letting the children actually practice saying the word "no." Teen leaders also act out situations that they have faced at some point in their lives. This gives children a view of the pressures to come and helps prepare them to handle pressures properly. Missy Soltis, a teen leader at the Philipsburg site said, "The role-playing is a lot of fun. The kids say 'If I see this situation, I won't do that.'" In addition to saying "no," children also have to make other decisions and explain the reasons behind their decisions. One example requires teens to role-play the part of a bully by pressuring a child through intimidation. This mimics real life situations and provides another chance for kids to practice saying "no." Another example involves teens enacting a high school party and showing how they maintain their self-respect by refusing drugs. One valuable aspect of role-playing is that it gives children the opportunity to act out current problems in their life, whether or not they involve drugs, and provides suggestions on how to handle such situations. The role-playing was an enjoyable aspect of the program for the kids. "I think it was very effective," said Panama Central School teen leader, Erica Simpson. "The kids had a lot of fun doing it, which is priority one as far as getting something across. It seemed to go really well. Sometimes we'd be in it with them, and sometimes they'd do it by themselves, and they were really creative." Role-playing is a very important element of the program because it offers youth helpful techniques on how to get out of situations that they are likely to face later in their lives.

Teen Training

Teen training sessions consisted of five to eight hours of preparation time. They were taught the full curriculum and also learned techniques on how to discipline children and motivate learning. They also took time before each session to review that day's lesson plans. The teens taught the entire curriculum. Adults merely supervised or helped out with sticky situations. Although teens were provided with lesson plans, they improvised them from time to time to personalize situations. "We did a little improvising, making examples personal so they would be more understandable," said Philipsburg teen leader, Natalie Coleman. The teens shared personal experiences so children would be better prepared for situations they may face in the future.

Teens as Teachers

As mentioned before, the principal investigators of the LST program hoped to prove that teens can be effective leaders and have a positive influence on youth resistance skills. Based on the comments from teen and adult leaders, this theory was validated. The program found that teens can be effective role models for youth. Youth related more easily to the teens who were closer in age to them than adults. The kids thought the teens were "cool." All leaders agreed that it was "cooler" for kids to learn about drugs from teens who face that kind of pressure in high school rather than from adults who are removed from the problem. Most kids grow tired of hearing adults "preach" at them about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Tim Rollins commented, "If you remember back to that age, it was cooler to hear something you didn't want to hear from a teen who knew more than your parents did. There is a tendency to believe your peer group more than your parents. A lot of the kids told the teens that they were tired of hearing the teachers preach and that they really didn't believe them because they weren't out in the real life situations that the teens were." It was very beneficial for the kids to see actual high schoolers advocate not doing drugs. "Even though these kids may be football players, cheerleaders, or in clubs, they show that you don't have to take drugs to be cool," said Rick Walters. It showed the kids that not everyone does drugs and that these very cool high schoolers were taking a stand against using them. Waliston-Boggs teacher, Sue MacGee commented on this. "It's great to see teens who aren't using drugs. These teens are really involved in clubs and it makes kids see that there are other options than drugs. They see that these teens are having a good time in school without drugs."

"Even though these kids may be football players, cheerleaders, or in clubs, they show that you don't have to take drugs to be cool."

Benefits to Youth

During the course of the program, teens also developed positive relationships with their students. Adult leaders reported that a great camaraderie developed between the two groups and that the teens took an interest in the kids even outside of class. When the children encountered the high school students in other settings, such as in stores, at school, or school functions like football games, the teens acknowledged them, talked to them and treated them as friends. Missy Soltis commented, "I'm a cheerleader, and the kids would come up to me at football games. We formed really great relationships." These relationships

should have a positive influence on the kids for the rest of their lives. It's important to have strong role models to look up to and follow as an example.

Benefits to Teens

The children were not the only ones who benefited from the program. Teen and adult leaders also voiced that many aspects of the program benefited the teens, too. The most common response among teens was that they gained the satisfaction of knowing that they were doing something good for others, having a positive effect on younger children. Philipsburg teen leader, Joe Daminano said, "I have the satisfaction of knowing I'm doing something good and doing whatever I can to better myself. It's great seeing the kids around and knowing they are not smoking with my help." It was very rewarding for them to know that someone looked up to them for direction. Adult leader, Rick Walters, said that some teens are even considering teaching as a future career.

Adults remarked that the program gave teens a positive leadership experience. It also helped them improve their public speaking skills. Most teens began to see themselves as adults not just recipients of data, but actual presenters. Student teacher, Matt Anderson of Panama Central School said, "I had the chance to present in front of a group and that has helped me already in college where I have to present in front of a class." Adults noted that self-esteem was one area where teens improved tremendously. Being up in front of a classroom, knowing that the kids believed in what they were saying had a great impact on the confidence of the teens. Although most teens felt they were not able to do enough, they felt confident that with the experience they gained, they could do better next time. The majority of teens agreed to participate in the program for at least another year or two.

In addition, teens were able to redefine themselves in front of their own peers. Not only did the program offer positive reinforcement for the younger children but for the teens as well. Through teaching, they also learned more about drugs and alcohol and also about life skills such as improving assertiveness. "I learned some things I didn't know, too. I thought I knew a lot about drugs, but I found that there was a lot I didn't know," said Philipsburg teen leader, Mindy Pleskonko. All adults agreed that the teens held strong convictions about what they were teaching. "I have never felt that these were kids out drinking and doing drugs," said Philipsburg's Ninth Street Elementary School teacher, Linda Thompson. "They believe in what they're saying." Rick Walters agreed. "It's a chance for them to redefine themselves in front of their peers and gain self-esteem. They are publicly saying to their peers, 'This is where we stand.'"

Benefits to Adults

Not only did relationships develop between children and teens, but between adults and teens as well. Most of the adult leaders played a part in bringing the program to their area. All commented that it was rewarding for them to see the program succeed. Linda Thompson said that she really enjoyed working with the teenagers and that it was great to see students in her area taking a positive stand against drugs. Likewise, Rick Walters, from the Panama, New York, site commented that he loved seeing the program work at his school. "I really enjoy my students. This was an opportunity to see them contribute something to the community."

> *"It's a chance for them to redefine themselves in front of their peers and gain self-esteem. They are publicly saying to their peers, 'This is where we stand.'"*

Disadvantages & Problems Incurred

One of the biggest disadvantages to the program was that Session three of the SMART Moves program was banned because it focused on sexual activity prevention. Dr. Rollins said this had no influence on the outcome of the program, since they knew they could not include it from the beginning. However, he said that at one of the sites, the information accidentally got copied in one of the packets and teens began teaching it before they were stopped. The kids began asking questions and once the issue had been raised, there was apparently a large amount of questions. The questions asked turned out to be well thought out and mature. Often, children are not provided with enough information about sex. Dr. Rollins felt that this lesson would have benefited areas like Philipsburg where there are high rates of venereal disease and teen pregnancy.

Discipline also became a problem at times. Some of the teens commented that they had problems controlling the kids at first but eventually gained their respect. However, in one group, there was an attention deficit disorder (ADD) child who often distracted the group and got things off track. Here, the adult leader had to step in often because the teen leaders lacked the assertiveness and patience to handle the situation. The leader commented that a training session

could be provided to help teens deal with situations like this. Another comment was to pair teen leaders based on complementary strengths.

One suggestion for changing the program was to broaden the curriculum, so that new activities are introduced in the second year. Currently the program is carried out in fifth and sixth grade, and activities are identical from year to year.

The only other complaint was that of time. 4-H club supervisors suggested that sessions be combined, because it was difficult for parents to transport their children after school. On the other hand, one of the school teachers complained that the program should have run for more than nine weeks.

Overall Success

Overall, the Life Skills Training program was successful. Both teens and adults felt that the program was well-implemented and that the younger children were very interested in what was being taught. Teens were well-prepared, enthusiastic and cooperative. They developed positive relationships with both the children and the adults.

Most of the adults agreed that the program changed attitudes and behaviors and also positively reinforced resistance to drugs and alcohol. There is a great need for prevention instead of intervention, and the belief is that this program catches fifth- and sixth-graders at a crucial time in their life when pressures have the most influence on them. The teens enable the children to see what problems they will face in high school and how to properly handle those tough situations. LST proved that teens make very positive role models that are very likely to have a great influence on children. Erica Simpson commented on the success of the program for the kids. "If their attitude is in any way reflective of what they got out of it, then they really got a lot out of it," she said. "They really went at it with great gusto. They were really enthusiastic." Through the relationship they developed with their role models, the children also learned that high school offers many options other than drugs, like clubs and sports. The children were able to leave the program with positive attitudes about their ability to say no to drugs and alcohol and a positive outlook toward high school and the future. "I think they are more aware of their surroundings and what they'll encounter in later years," said Philipsburg teen leader, Megan Kenjora. Likewise, Erica Simpson commented, "As far as staying away from drugs, the kids had positive attitudes. They learned what they needed to know and had fun doing it."

The Future of the Program

Currently the LST program is being implemented in the Philipsburg-Osceola School District and also in the city of Wilkes-Barre in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The other three sites either did not have enough funding or leaders to continue the program. Dr. Rollins and Dr. Tina St. Pierre, assistant professor of agriculture and extension education at Penn State, have submitted a proposal to conduct a statewide testing of the SMART Moves program.

The Life Skills Training program was developed from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America Start SMART program. Start SMART was adapted by the National Prevention Program of Boys & Girls Clubs of America from a curriculum developed at the University of California and UCLA.

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Notes

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